

Bridge to Terabithia

by Katherine Paterson

Rationale by Kent L. Bryson

Grade Level and Audience

In this novel, *Bridge to Terabithia*, Katherine Paterson (1977) tells a fascinating story of friendship. Paterson's novel is a heart warming story of two children who use each other's strength to conquer and overcome many of their own weakness. Paterson's vivid details of the characters, setting, language, and lifestyle afford the reader the opportunity to actually join in the cast of characters.

Bridge to Terabithia is an excellent novel for boys and girls ages nine to twelve because it deals with real life situations and problems that many children in the nine to twelve age group find difficult to cope with. Paterson is praised by many critics for creating a realistic boy-girl friendship, something "so curiously unsung in literature" *Christian Science Monitor* (1978, p. B2.) One of the stronger subjects Paterson presents in *Bridge to Terabithia* is death. Yet Paterson presents death in a very sensitive manner that should not prove controversial to the readers. Another character briefly introduces the subject of child abuse and again Paterson presents this issue in a very knowledgeable and realistic format that the young adult reader would not find objectionable.

Plot Summary

Bridge to Terabithia is set in rural Virginia in the mid-1970's. It is important to note that during this time period the social structure of this country was very unsettling. The Vietnam war was almost ending, the nation was becoming divided with war protest, the civil rights movements, and uncertain economic times.

Bridge to Terabithia revolves around three group characters: the Aarons, the Burkes, and the students and faculty in the elementary school. Jess Aaron, who is one of the central characters, is the middle son between four sisters. The two older sisters, Brenda and Ellie, are teenagers who have a strong relationship with their mother and have little use for Jess. His younger sisters, Joyce Ann and May Belle, look to Jess as a true big brother, someone they can look up to. Mrs. Aarons, Jess's mother, has the task of raising the children, working inside and outside the home and being the head of the household because of her husband Mr. Aarons is always away from home working in a nearby city. Mrs. Aarons believes in the unwritten traditional household law that says men do men's work and women do women's work. As a result of this, Jess has an unusually high amount of work to do in the absence of his father, which leaves him to believe that he is the least favored child.

The Burkes are a well-to-do family with one daughter, Leslie, who moved to rural Virginia from Washington D.C. to reassess their family values. Upon their arrival, they establish their home with only the bare essentials such as no television. While this may seem strange to the young reader today, during this period a number of well-off families were returning to basic lifestyles in order to rediscover their value judgments. Judy and Bill, Leslie's parents, are writers and spend most of their time absorbed in their work. The condition of the house and attention to Leslie are virtually nonexistent until they finish the books they are working on. Leslie is the other central figure who is hungry for friendship, companionship, and the feeling of belonging.

Lark Creek Elementary is a typical rural school. The school is overcrowded and the conditions are very bad. Two teachers, Miss Edmunds and Mrs. Meyers, are very important in this novel. Miss Edmunds is a young music teacher who is very energetic and sincerely likes Jess. As a result, she gives Jess

something to cling to in addition to being very supportive of him. Mrs. Meyers is an older teacher who is in awe of Leslie's intelligence yet can still appreciate Leslie's talents.

Gary Fulcher, who, like Jess, wants to be the fastest boy in the fifth grade, develops a dislike for Jess when he is forced to race Leslie, who defeats him time and time again. Janice Avery is two years older than Jess and Leslie and as a result of the beatings given to her by her father, consistently antagonizes the children in the school.

Terabithia is a magical place in the woods where Jess and Leslie go to get away from day-to-day problems of life. In Terabithia, they can live in their imaginary world where everything is perfect. Jess is made king of the magical place and Leslie is the queen. In order to get to Terabithia they must rope swing across a creek bed. It is doing these visits to Terabithia that Jess and Leslie develop an unparalleled friendship.

During the Easter break it begins to rain extremely hard and the creek becomes flooded. The rising water causes Jess extreme concern yet he, with the urging of fearless Leslie continues to rope swing across the creek. Shortly thereafter his music teacher invites him to spend a day in Washington D.C. Leslie goes to Terabithia without him and the rope breaks and she drowns. Jess returns home that night and finds out that Leslie is dead. Grieving, angry, and upset, Jess becomes very moody and withdrawn. Several days later he returns to Terabithia to place a funeral wreath in the castle for Leslie. He hears May Belle crying for help and realizes she has followed him to Terabithia. He rescues her from the creek and eventually takes her to Terabithia and makes her the new queen.

Theoretical Support and Redeeming Values

Bridge to Terabithia is a highly symbolic, multi-layered story that deals with family, life, friendship, fantasies, romance, and death. Paterson thrust herself into this story by relating her own experiences and those of her son. So much attention was paid to the development of the characters, the real life settings, and the thoroughly convincing dialog (*Contemporary Authors*, 1990, p. 359). Additionally Paterson focuses on the difficult and enlightening process through which young people who are prematurely left to their own resources become acquainted with the compromises and obligations that are necessary to survive in the adult world, says the *Washington Post Book World* (1978).

Throughout the story Paterson weaves various conflicts that the characters must address and overcome. This is culminated by the death of one of the main characters and again the reader is presented the problem and at the same time gets the opportunity to see even how something as devastating as death can be overcome.

Rosenblatt (1983) argues that the literature experience tends to involve both the intellect and the emotions in a manner that parallels life itself. The insights attained through literature may be assimilated into the matrix of attitudes and ideas which constitute character and govern behavior. *Bridge to Terabithia* affords readers the opportunity to look at both intellectual and emotional experiences and at the same time provides them with possible alternatives to deal with them.

Additional theoretical support for reading the book *Bridge to Terabithia* comes from Carleton (1971), *Books for the Teenage Reader*. Carlson notes that children in the early adolescence stage, "like to compare their own experiences with those of young people of the same age growing up in other cultures" (p. 24). *Bridge to Terabithia* is written in a manner that actually allows the reader to feel as though he or she is actually in the story. Paterson creates real life experiences using early adolescent dialogue, in a life like setting. Even the most discriminating reader cannot help relating to the characters and their triumphs

and frustrations.

Theorist Piaget (1962) argues that children in the age group of Jess and Leslie construct theories and make logical deductions about their consequences without having had any previous direct experience with the subject. They can deal with abstractions and mentally explore similarities and differences because they have mastered reversibility and decentration. They can think their way through new problems, moving forward and backward and taking in account as many or as few qualities as seem relevant. Throughout the story you can see Jess and Leslie going through this experience. Both Jess and Leslie knew that the creek was high and both realize certain dangers existed; however, even after taking this into account they still made the decision to swing across the creek.

Using Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1969), the reader finds Jess and Leslie passing through stage two: realizing that there are risk involved in crossing the creek, to stage three: understanding the risk yet continuing to cross the creek. One could argue based upon Kohlberg's level of moral development that Jess and Leslie were not fully into stage three. Kohlberg's level of moral development states that a person cannot react to moral reasoning until he has mastered formal thinking. Jess and Leslie had mastered the formal thinking and therefore knew the danger of crossing the creek and what the results might be.

Using Erickson's stage of psychosocial development, (1968) we again find Jess and Leslie going through one stage (industry versus inferiority) to another stage (identity versus role confusion). Jess and Leslie were made to feel inferior mostly by their parents which as individuals caused both to feel inadequate. Jess really wanted to paint but his father's constant criticism caused him to feel inadequate about himself. Leslie wanted love and attention but when she did not receive it she began to feel inferior. Together they were able to overcome the dilemmas and move to the next stage. They were attempting to define their own identity and do things on their own. This is evidenced by Jess taking over the races at school and Leslie taking on Janice Avery. It is further evidence by their insistence to continue crossing the creek in spite of the dangers.

In Havighurst's developmental theory (1953) we see Jess and Leslie at stage four where they are trying to achieve emotional independence from parents and other adults. Jess is convinced that his mother does not like him because she never buys him anything, forces him to do all the big chores and speaks to him only in a rough tone. He further believes that his father dislikes him because he never spends time with him and only talks to him when problems arise. Leslie, on the other hand, wants emotional independence from her parents because she truly believes that they are depriving her of the surrounding she has become accustomed to and put their own personal growth in front of her well being. As individuals, neither Jess nor Leslie can achieve the emotional independence they so desperately want. However, together we see them comfortably in this stage.

Literary Qualities and Summary of Reviews

The literary criteria for judging fiction as identified in Pettitt's dissertation (1961, pp. 128-133) provides an in-depth look at Paterson's excellent writing skills. Using this criteria, *Bridge to Terabithia* is definitely a novel that is well structured, with all parts working together to create and present the whole story. The theme of the story is very skillfully developed and flows very rhythmically throughout the story. While Paterson introduces a magical land in the story, the realism far outweighs the fiction portion of the story. The plot of the story is easily recognizable to the reader. While each sub-plot could stand on its own merit, Paterson's ability to bring to the sub plots into the whole story is another example of her outstanding writing abilities.

Bridge to Terabithia is a highly symbolic story that deals with fantasies, romance, and death. Pat Cunningham (1979, p. 217) In *The Reading Teacher* states that *Bridge to Terabithia* is: "truly magical. The special friendship between a preadolescent boy and girl is impossible to describe and memorable to experience". *The School Library Journal* (1977, p. 61) states that *Bridge to Terabithia* is: "Unusual because it portrays a believable relationship between a boy and a girl at an age when same-sex friendships are not the norm. It also represents a unromantic realistic and moving reaction to personal tragedy. Jess and Leslie are so effectively developed as characters many young readers might feel that they were their classmates."

One of the many strengths of this book is the author's strong sense of plot. Paterson began writing this story as the result of a tragedy endured by her son when one of his young friends was suddenly killed by a bolt of lightning. As the novel progressed, Paterson began to come to terms with her own mortality, which helped her add honesty and sincerity to the story.

Horn Book Magazine (1978, p. 48) calls the characters in *Bridge to Terabithia* magnificent. It further adds that the book abounds in descriptive vignettes, humorous sidelights on the class cultures, and realistic depictions of rural school life. The symbolism of falling and building bridges forms a theme throughout the story which is one of remarkable richness and depth.

Bridge to Terabithia provides the reader with in-depth views on friendships, family structures, school life, fantasies, and death. Paterson does a wonderful job of weaving each of these sub-plots in and out to make the master plot magnificent. Best Seller (1978, p. 368) in a review calls *Bridge to Terabithia* "a beautiful book encompassing all of the themes and nuances of deep feeling. All the entanglement lovers feel with each other's sensitive interpretations of life". *Bridge to Terabithia* "is not a love story of physical encounters but a fusion of souls and minds. There is a truth, a realism to the childlike expression of fear, love, and friendship."

When Paterson introduces death into the story initially it does not seem logical. However, as one thinks about the events that lead up to Leslie's accidental death one very quickly realizes that the author has used her magical writing skills to introduce another symbol into the story. Paterson has one believe that death was inevitable and very quickly proceeds to show the reader that life can proceed after death and that an individual can grow both mentally and spiritually as the result of losing a loved one. After hearing of Leslie's death, Jess becomes withdrawn and moody. Shortly thereafter, however, remembering how Leslie broadened his thinking and helped him become more sure of himself, he begins to improve relationship with his parents and sisters. Coincidentally, his parents and sisters begin to view Jess in a different manner after Leslie's death. Leslie's parents realize that rural America is not really the place they can be happy and decide to move back to the suburbs.

In closing, this book is a must read for all young adults. *Journal of Reading* (1978, p. 184) calls *Bridge to Terabithia* a Newbery award book a book that will be read. Children's Literature Association Quarterly (1984, p. 225) states that *Bridge to Terabithia* "combines the accuracy and literally truthfulness expected of realism with another kind of power usually associated with ethics and religion."

Students could use this book to evaluate their own inner feelings on many of the subjects introduced in *Bridge to Terabithia*. *Horn Book* (1978, p. 48) calls *Bridge to Terabithia* Paterson's most revealing self portrait to date, giving best clues to her identity as a person and a writer.

Paterson wanted the readers to know that life can contain romance, friendship, fantasies, and death. None of these situations are all good nor are they all bad. In fact, in most cases each can be both good

and bad. The idea for the young adult readers are to recognize the fact that good and bad can come from each of these yet we need to enjoy the good times that each of these represent, and not dwell on the bad times. *Bridge to Terabithia* is truly a moving story designed to complement and enhance the understanding of young readers (*News Republic*, 1977, p. 28).

Objectives, Teaching Methods and Assignments

Suggested Teaching Objectives

1. In spite of Jess's disappointment caused by losing to Leslie in the race, Jess and Leslie developed a very strong friendship. How did this happen?
2. Jess's overall relationship with his family is not good. What could be done to improve his relationship with his parents and sisters?
3. Leslie's relationship with her parents was also not good. What could have been done to enhance their relationship?
4. Terabithia appears to be a place where Jess and Leslie can enhance their relationship and utilize each other's strength to enhance their own weaknesses. Could this growth have occurred in any other place rather than this imaginary one?
5. Once they discover how Janice Avery's father treats her, what effects did this have on their feeling toward her?
6. Are Jess's reactions to Leslie's death normal?
7. Are Leslie's parents reaction to her death normal?

Suggested Student Activities

Discuss Jess's relationship with his family.

Even though Jess's mother was not a central character in the book, discuss what effects her actions had on the family.

After living in a major metropolitan area the Burkes decided to move to rural Virginia. Discuss what effects this may or may not have had on Leslie.

If you wrote a sequel to *Bridge to Terabithia*, how would you portray Jess five years later?

What problems did Leslie have as the result of being an only child?

Possible Essay Questions

1. Define the plot of the story. Is it about death or friendship?
2. Put yourself in Jess's place and discuss how you would have felt after hearing of the death of a dear friend.
3. Throughout the book Jess's father seems to be unsympathetic and uncaring. Briefly explain the reason for this type of attitude.
4. What effects do you think child abuse had on Janice Avery and her relationship with other children?
5. The move from the suburbs to rural Virginia affected the entire Burke family. Briefly discuss what these effects were.

Meaning Study

deep rusty ruts (p. 4)
impossible fixes (p. 10)
proverbial diamond (p. 14)
Snottiest (p. 23)
Priss-face (p. 23)
ruled (p 24)
prissily (p.30)
yellow-bellied sapsucker (p. 31)
traitorous (p. 124)

Vocabulary Words

Shebang (p. 4)
Peacenik (p. 13)
Cocoons (p. 24)
melodic (p. 30)
rumpus (p. 33)
directors (p. 44)
food-aholics (p. 44)
rejoiced (p. 52)
Jester (p. 72)
Aslan (p. 84)
Gunnysack (p. 85)
cremated (p. 114)

Possible Objections

death
child abuse
parents' views on child rearing
religious questions
child neglect
young adult dress code
lack of parental involvement
fighting
one parent family

Why *Bridge To Terabithia* Should Not Be Banned

Noted theorist Rosenblatt (1983) argues that there are useful and harmful forms of escape. Anything that offers refreshment and lessening of tension may have its values in helping us to resume our protocol lives with renewed vigor. Rosenblatt further argues that the possibility of compensating for lacks of failures through identification with a character who possesses qualities other than our own makes fuller use of capacities similar to our own is an important benefit to be derived from reading literature. These arguments provide us with the most significant reasons *Bridge to Terabithia* should not be banned. Paterson tells a very moving story with vivid details of two children growing up in rural America. Some critics may argue that Paterson weaves their relationship from the real world to the world of fantasy. The point to be made here is not that Paterson moves the story from real to fantasy but how well she does it. Most adolescent children, in addition to some adults, spend time fantasizing about various issues. Even though Paterson develops part of the story around the magical kingdom of Terabithia, she does it in a

very wonderful manner. Language Arts Journal (1978, p. 620) states the *Bridge to Terabithia* has strong characterizations and believable dialogue, with formal language and fanciful setting in a bittersweet tale of growing up.

Paterson does not sugar coat any portion of the story, which increases its believability with the readers. She could have downplayed the child neglect, sibling rivalry, child abuse, and death. This however is not Paterson's style. In writing *Bridge to Terabithia*, Paterson draws from her own experiences and those of her son David.

Paterson shows time and time again in *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved* (1982) the ability to put all of her fictionalized characters in real life situations. She could have easily ended this superb novel with Jess and Leslie living happy ever after and enjoying a wonderful family life. However, this would have taken so much realism from the story. Book List (1977, p. 554) calls Paterson's character portrayals and changing relationships superb. The subject of death in a young adult novel causes uproar with critics. Review after review praises Paterson's ability to put death in a realistic manner. Contemporary Literary Criticisms (1989, pp. 282-283) argues that the subject of death was Patterson's only real lapse in the story, and that the book in spite of the introduction of death stands perfectly well with it.

Rosenblatt argues that by reading literary works the students are exposed to experiences, emotions, and attitudes about cultural groups helping them see appropriate responses to situations and people. *Bridge to Terabithia*, while it is fiction, gives the opportunity to become a part of the story and experience many of the problems associated with the characters.

Not all books are appropriate for students. Paterson's work is a must read for young adults. Probably one of the best reasons for reading and not banning the book comes from the Best Seller (1978, p. 368) in which they write: Love stories, good love stories are rare today. *Bridge to Terabithia* is a beautiful love story encompassing all of the nuances of deep feeling, all of the entanglement lovers feel with each other and sensitive interpretations of life. Again, *Bridge to Terabithia* is not a love story of physical encounter but a fusion of souls and minds. There is a truth, a realism to the childlike expression of fear, love, and friendship that should assure the author a permanent place among those whose books are sought by the author.

Bridge to Terabithia won the prestigious John Newbery Medal in 1978. Other awards given Patterson for her work include School Library Journal's Best Book Award (1978), the D. Lett King College Award (1978), the Saint Mary of Woods College Award (1981), the University of Maryland and Washington and Lee University Award (1982), the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award (1978), the Janusz Korczak Medal (1981), the Colorado Blue Spruce Young Adult Book Award (1986), and the Le Grand Prix Des Jeunes Lectures Award (1986). Additionally, *Bridge to Terabithia* is recommended by The Junior High School Paperback Collection (1985), Best Books for Children (1989), Junior High School Library Catalog (1990), and the New York Times Book Review (1981).

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New York Times Book Review. April (1981)., pp. 52-67.

Awards Earned By Katherine Paterson

American Library Association Notable Children's Book
Award for *Of Nightingales that Weep*, 1974
Child Study Assoc. of Americas Children's Books of the Year for *Of Nightingales that Weep*, 1974
National Book Award for Children's Literature, 1977 & 1979
Runner-up for Edgar Allen Poe Award (Juvenile Division), 1977
John Newbery Medal, 1978
Lewis Carrol Shelf Award, 1978
Michigan Young Readers Award, 1980
National Book Award for Children's Literature
Christopher Award, 1979
CRABbery Honor Book
American Book Award Nominee Children's Paperback 1980
William Allen White Children's Book Award 1981
Garden State Children Book Award Younger Division
New Jersey Library Assoc., 1981
Geo. Children's Book Award, 1981
Iowa Children's Choice Award, 1981
Mass. Children's Book Award, 1981
U.S. Nominee Hans Christian Anderson Award, 1980
New York James Outstanding Book List, 1980
CRABbery Honor Book ,1981
Parents' Choice Award Parent Choice Foundation ,1983
Irvin Kerlan Award ,1983
Univ. of So. Miss. Silver Medallion, 1983
Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, 1986
Regina Medal Award Catholic Library Assoc., 1988

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